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The LORD'S PRAYER

*8 studies
for individuals or groups*


Douglas Connelly



A LifeBuilder



Bible Study

 Scripture Union is an international Christian charity working with churches in more than 130 countries providing resources to bring the good news about Jesus Christ to children, young people and families and to encourage them to develop spiritually through the Bible and prayer. As well as coordinating a network of volunteers, staff and associates who run holidays, church-based events and school Christian groups, Scripture Union produces a wide range of publications and supports those who use their resources through training programmes.

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Getting the Most Out of *The Lord's Prayer*

No other words of the Bible are spoken more often than the 65 words we call the Lord's Prayer. Countless times every day, in the worship of the church and in the personal devotion of many Christians, these words spring to life—"Our Father, who art in heaven." The prayer is sung, recited in unison, mumbled mindlessly at times and, at other times, choked out through sobs of pain or remorse. For two thousand years Christians on every continent, and in every language, have lifted this prayer to God. When you take these words on your lips, you stand on sacred ground.

But what exactly was Jesus trying to communicate to us when he spoke this prayer? Did he intend that his followers would simply repeat the prayer, or was he giving us a pattern to follow in our own pursuit of prayer—or both? Prayer is one of those aspects of the Christian life that we don't fully understand, and yet Jesus enthusiastically invites us to pray. We can pray about a need for days or years and nothing seems to happen, but Jesus challenges us to keep at it. Prayer takes time and energy and discipline, and yet Jesus, even at his busiest, always put a priority on prayer. Maybe our prayers seem weak and ineffective because we haven't really listened to Jesus or learned from his example.

We call it the Lord's Prayer, but really it is the Disciples' Prayer. Jesus was showing his followers (including us) how to pray. The essential elements are all included. Our prayers sim-

ply adapt the requests to fit our own needs and circumstances.

This study guide is designed to help us look carefully at the Lord's Prayer. In the first session we will read through the whole prayer but then focus on what it means to pray to the Father. In the subsequent sessions we will continue through the prayer line by line, drawing in a secondary passage to go deeper into the themes for prayer that Jesus outlined. The goal, however, is not just to know more *about* the prayer; the goal is to begin to pray as Jesus instructed us to pray. Studying the prayer is an important step, but what we want to cultivate is a passion to pray.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author's meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided

or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under "Now or Later," or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have "right" answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

1

Talking to the Father

Matthew 6:5-15

When I was about fifteen years old, our family visited some caverns in Pennsylvania. At every stop on the tour the guide droned on and on about stalagmites and rock formations while I just wanted to see what was next. At one point I left the lecture and moved ahead on the trail. What I didn't know was that the guide was about to turn off all the lights in the cave so we could experience absolute darkness. When the lights went off, I was so frightened I opened my mouth to let out a scream. At that moment a hand touched my shoulder and a familiar voice said, "Doug, I'm right here." My dad had seen me walk away and had followed. It was still dark, but I felt safe in my father's care.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Talk about one positive quality that you saw in your father or that you imagine in an ideal father.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. If you could fashion a father, what one character trait would be most important?

What we have come to call the Lord's Prayer was spoken in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—a long talk Jesus gave about how to live distinctively as a Christian in an evil world. Jesus gave the prayer to his followers in the context of some very practical words on when and where and how to pray. We will read the whole prayer but focus on verses 5-9 in this session. *Read Matthew 6:5-15.*

1. What kinds of dysfunctional prayer does Jesus warn about in verses 5-8?

2. Jesus commands us to pray in secret. Does that rule out public prayer? Explain your answer.

3. When you pray out loud in front of other people, what can you do to focus on God rather than on how your prayer sounds to others?

4. Since we are not to pray repetitive (“babbling”) prayers (v. 7), how can you make repeating the Lord's Prayer spiritually enriching?

5. If God knows our needs before we pray (v. 8), why pray at all?

6. As you think about the context in which the Lord's Prayer was first spoken (skim chapters 5 and 6), do you think Jesus wanted us to pray these exact words, or is he giving us a general pattern for prayer? Why?

What misuses of the prayer could spring from either position?

7. The word Jesus uses to call on the Father is the common word that children in Jesus' day used to address their father—the word *Abba*, meaning "Dearest Father." What emotions do you feel as you call God "Dearest Father"?

8. Why does Jesus instruct us to address God as *our* Father rather than *my* Father (v. 9)?

9. If the word *Father* suggests the nearness of God, “Our Father in heaven” points to God’s majesty and power. How does the fact that God rules in heaven over all things make you feel about coming to him with your needs and requests?

10. Do most of your prayers emphasize God’s gentle presence with us or God’s awesome majesty?

What can you do to bring more balance in your approach to God in prayer?

Before you pray, reflect quietly for a few minutes on the person you are going to speak to. Think about his greatness, his wisdom and his love. Focus on God and then express your love for him.

Now or Later

The New Testament encourages Christians to address God as *Abba*. Think about your own view of God the Father as you read these verses.

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba*, Father.” (Galatians 4:6)

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. (Romans 8:15-16)

For the next week address your prayers to *Abba*. It may seem strange at first, but you are taking on your lips the same word Jesus used as he addressed his own dear Father.

The Lord's Prayer

'Our Father, who art in heaven...' No other words of the Bible are spoken more often than the 65 words we call the Lord's Prayer. Countless times every day for the past two thousand years – in church worship, in personal devotion, in every language on every continent – the words come to life. Prayer takes time, energy, discipline, perseverance. How can these words of Jesus help us understand prayer? Perhaps more significantly, how can they give us more passion for prayer?



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